

## YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY

Exod 20:14

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*The Scarlet Letter*, a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne published in 1850, has been called “the first American tragedy” and is considered a masterpiece of American literature and a classic moral study. The setting of the story is the early days of Puritan Boston where Hester Prynne bears and braves the stigma of adultery by wearing the embroidered scarlet “A” on her clothing. Hester’s suffering is painful, for she must forfeit her freedom to walk as an equal citizen of society, never allowed to forget a private indiscretion that has been made public. But it is not only Hester who is affected, the reader eventually learns that Hester’s crime affects those around her, which shows the impact an individual’s actions has on the society in which they live.

“You shall not commit adultery.” Let us look at the seventh commandment, within the context of the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**” (20:1-3).

“**You shall not make for yourself an idol**, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments” (20:4-6)

“**You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God**, for Yahweh will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name” (20:7).

“**Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy**. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your livestock, or the alien resident who is within your settlements. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He

rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy” (20:8-11).

“**Honor your father and your mother**, so that your days may be long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you” (20:12).

“**You shall not kill**” (20:13).

“**You shall not commit adultery**” (20:14).

Adultery is not only a crime against another person or persons, it is also a sin against Yahweh Himself. It violates God’s intention in creation, which places human sexuality in the context of a covenant-relationship between a husband and a wife.

The clear and specific force of the seventh commandment is to guard the sanctity of the marriage relationship, and it recognizes that the sexual relationship of wife and husband is the center of intimacy and commitment, which must be carefully guarded if the marriage is to be carefully guarded.

In the Old Testament, this commandment meant that the wife was prohibited from sexual intercourse with any other male and the husband was prohibited from sexual intercourse with any other married woman. Yes, there is a double standard in the Old Testament for the treatment of males and females. A man was granted a great deal more freedom than a woman, and the woman was always seen as the more dangerous and the more responsible party in a sexual relationship. This inequity reflects both the patriarchal structure of Israelite society and probably also the desire to protect the paternity of the offspring of a marriage.

Although it would be fruitful and fascinating to discuss the implications of such gender inequality, I do not wish to pursue the matter in today’s lesson. Let me simply say that such inequality was not and is not God’s intention in creation. God fashioned both male and female in His own image, and He charged both male and female to act as His images to the world. Male domination and female subordination are the consequences of sin; gender inequality is a distortion of God’s creation that is characteristic of a fallen world. Whether in ancient Israel or in the modern church, it is wrong to stereotype women and to strip them of equality.

Today, the seventh commandment can be extended to apply equally to women and men, and can be extended to prohibit any sexual activity that threatens the marriage relationship. Anyone, male or female, who from the outside breaks the covenant of

marriage between a couple acts in a way contrary to the intent of the seventh commandment. On what basis can I broaden the application of this commandment? On the basis of the very first commentary on the seventh commandment—the words of Jesus in Matt 5:27-28:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (NRSV).

There is no double standard here. The problem lies not in the beauty of the female; the problem lies in the lustful mind of the male. Furthermore, Jesus warns not only against the act of adultery, but also against the lustful desire that leads to adultery.

We live in a culture that is almost notorious for disregarding the seventh commandment. In fact, many discussions of this commandment often resort to crass talk and bad jokes. It is astonishing how much of network TV is based on flagrant adultery between consenting, hot-blooded “adults.” And it is amazing how much Hollywood revenue is earned from the depiction of in-your-face adultery between “adults.” There is an incredible irony in naming this activity “*adultery*” since so much of the behavior appears to be more juvenile than adult. The seventh commandment envisions covenant-relationships of mutual companionship that are invigorating, enriching, and enhancing. Such a notion of long-term trust is treated as almost passé in our society preoccupied with individual freedom and satisfaction. This commandment insists that issues of sexuality are not a casual matter for the good order of God’s world. What does it mean to take sex seriously in a culture that speaks of sex as “scoring,” “hitting,” and “hooking up”? What does it mean to take sex seriously where a bracelet game is played in public schools that obligates a young girl to perform certain sex acts when the corresponding colored bracelet is snatched from her wrist by a young man? For a supposedly sexually enlightened, sexually liberated society, we still have a lot to learn about sex.

In pushing sex out into public view, the Ten Commandments are making some rather astounding claims about sex. We have been conditioned to think of sex as personal and private. But here, in the Ten Commandments, sex goes public. Somehow the whole future of Israel as God’s people is tied to how it goes for us as women and men.

Human sexuality is enormously wondrous and enormously dangerous. In the Bible, perhaps the most well-known story of adultery is the tale of King David and Bathsheba.

In 2 Sam 11, we find the king, who already has many wives, is enthralled with bathing Bathsheba and eventually commits adultery with her. It is adulterous because she is married to one of David's mercenary generals, Uriah the Hittite. Within the confines of this one chapter, David breaks half of the Ten Commandments: he has killed, he has committed adultery, he has coveted, he has lied against his neighbor, and he has stolen a woman away from her husband. The results are disastrous in the extreme. One after another, David's children assault one another (Amnon rapes Tamar), kill one another (Absalom kills Amnon), and finally depose their own father from his kingship (Absalom runs David out of Jerusalem). No more graphic tale of the inevitable horrors of adultery could be imagined.

And what happens today? Does not chaos and turmoil appear when adultery is discovered? Divorce often ensues, children are profoundly affected, grandparents are left in confusion, communities of churches, clubs, neighborhoods are forced to change their perceptions of each person in the family. And each individual influenced by the adulterous behavior must reorient themselves to the changed situation. Some will be angry, some sad, some shattered, some on the surface indifferent; all will never be the same. Adultery has enormous consequences, some predictable, many unpredictable. The fabric of a community is forever torn, and the process of reweaving is often-times slow and sometimes impossible. Those who would say that what goes on in our bedrooms is nobody's business are naïve fools. Sex with someone else's partner unleashes forces that threaten to swallow the world, or at the least to chew up our part of the world into a messy pulp.

So, shall we brand all adulterers with a scarlet letter? . . . No. We have missed the point if we use the seventh commandment only as a club to beat an already sinful world. As the church—like Israel, the people of God—the seventh commandment calls us to show to the outside world healthy, wholesome, life-long marriages. The seventh commandment is not a prescription for the world at large; it is medicine to be taken by those who claim to be God's people. As followers of Jesus, we are called to proclaim the equality of male and female, to practice sexual purity, and to portray loving, honoring marriages that resemble the relationship between Christ and His church. And before we pick up rocks to stone those guilty of sexual sin, let us remember that it was Jesus who

said to an adulterous woman, “Go now, and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11).

Loving others as Jesus loves us means that we put down our stones and we pick up His cross. It means that we preach and practice the amazing grace of God. For not only is His grace the only hope for this world, it is our only hope too.

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